

# Book Reviews

## Shot Down and in the Drink

RAF and Commonwealth aircrews saved from the sea 1939-1945

By Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork

**S**hot Down and in the Drink follows on from Graham Pitchfork's previous work 'Shot Down and on the Run', which had a justifiably glowing review in this journal at the time of its publication. Whilst the basic approach is the same, using a number of individual cases to illustrate the broader aspects of a particular subject area, obviously in this case the focus is on their survival and rescue of the large number of allied airmen who ended up in the sea during World War 2. Although many readers will be aware of the fact that a number of aircrew inevitably ended up ditching, the fact that losses in the sea of trained aircrew during 1941 averaged 200 a month is a clear indicator as to why an efficient search and rescue service was desperately needed.

The book comprises 16 chapters, split into four parts, covering the air sea rescue organisation itself, and then going on to look at specific cases in Northwest Europe, the Mediterranean and West Africa, and India and the Far East. The first part looks at the development of the air sea rescue organisation. Although this had existed in a nascent form in the First World War, providing support to aircraft engaged in anti-submarine operations, it was basic in nature as most aircraft carrying out such duties tended to operate close to shipping lanes where help was generally not far away. Unfortunately the procedures that had been worked out rapidly fell into disuse during the early 1920s.

The introduction of much longer-range aircraft in the 1930s, however, together with the growing realisation that operations in Europe would involve long sea transits, resulted in a significant

amount of work being carried out from 1935 onwards to improve the chances of survival for aircrew at sea. Indeed the chance of surviving after landing in the sea at the start of the war only ran at about 20%, but that swiftly changed as the importance of rescuing such individuals became important not just in morale terms, but also in regard of the ability to make the most of a scarce resource. These efforts would eventually produce an organisation that supported the D-Day landings in Normandy, and following airborne operations, in an outstanding manner. The setting up of the organisation, the changes in aircrew training, and development of survival equipment and location aids are all covered in detail.

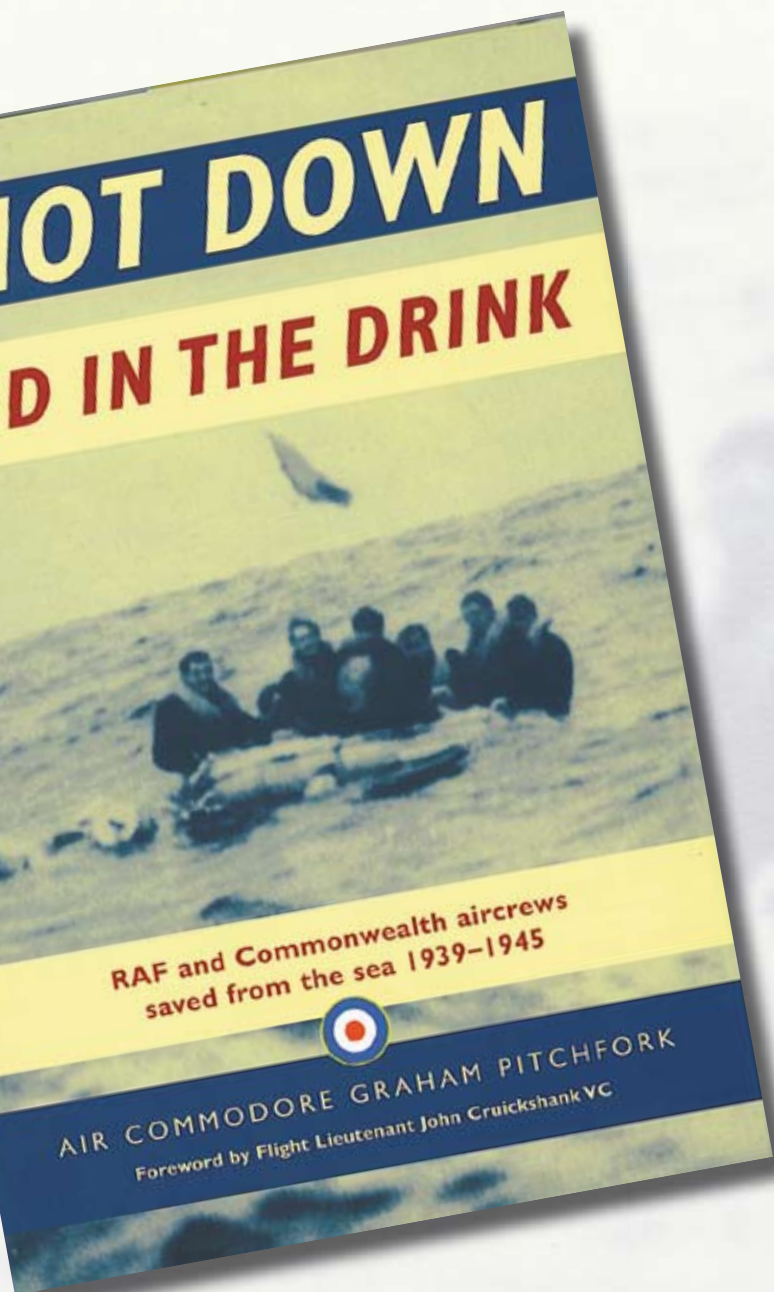
The rest of the book mostly consists of illustrative cases, showing the range of rescues (and in at least one case, escape) that allied aircrew were involved in. These range from the American airman flying with the RCAF who spent 14 days adrift in a dinghy in the North Sea, through to the Beaufort crew who hijacked the Italian floatplane that had picked them up near the Greek coast and managed to make their way back to Malta. However, it is not just a story of the aircrew, but also of those who manned the boats and search aircraft, and here also heroism abounded — as in the case of the high speed launch captain who in 1942 rescued a Stirling crew in daylight who were adrift in a minefield just eight miles from the Belgian coast.

Perhaps the high point of the air sea rescue service came during Operation Market Garden in 1944, when the tracks of the rescue tugs across the North Sea were so numerous, and so accurate in their positioning, that the tug aircraft only had to follow



# Book Reviews

95



them to make landfall. In the event a number of aircraft and gliders did end up making forced landings, but the launches were with them so quickly that, as is noted, 'the survivors hardly got their feet wet'.

Finally, a brief explanation of the origin of the 'Goldfish Club' is provided, membership of which was awarded to those who owed their lives to the manufacturers of air sea rescue equipment such as life rafts and jackets.

As with all of Graham Pitchfork's work, this bears the hallmarks of meticulous research combined with great storytelling, resulting in a read that is both entertaining and informative. It is a book that brings a human element to an important but often overlooked part of the RAF's operations during the Second World War, and with remarkable tales of heroism throughout it makes for inspiring reading.

It is eminently suitable for either reading straight through or simply as a book to dip into every now and then, as all of the stories are fascinating reads in their own right.

**By Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork**

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